

“Ready, Novikov?”

Turtle smile, a theatrical bow, and a sweeping gesture to proceed without worry.

“Always.” His reply carried its usual Russian lilt, though the tremor in it betrayed him. “Ну что, шоу начинается?”

He took two steps forward and set a hand on the curtain rope—the only thing holding back the grand crimson wall between them and the waiting audience. He wasn’t ready. He was ready. With a single pull, the play began.

Yet even as the music surged into the room, he remained in the shadows of the stage, breath tight, heart hammering, letting the moment swallow him before he stepped into the light.

Tonight is special. Or, rather, it is probably more truthful to say that tonight is a special night for everyone save myself. To the play’s benefactors, tonight serves as an example of what Missis. Domi has accomplished with the generous grant they had given her to jump-start this particular artistic endeavor. They were eager to see for themselves if this play would turn out as intended. Domi’s performers, the Auclair family, find this display a mix of disgusting politics and the promise of a future paycheck. I think it is safe to say which of the two won out their hearts in the end. Still, the reason for their disgust is not unfounded, nor unshared. I myself find the situation less than tasteful. You see, while the show may advertise a gallant boy forsaking all worldly things in order to serve at his majesty’s side in the upcoming war, complete with the most high quality effects and touching soundtracks, it is but propaganda. The show is a call to arms. A prophecy of war, actors the heralds.

My feet slow as I approach the stage. For once in my life, my career, I am concerned about the blowback of setting foot on a stage. I am the greatest performer of Paris; Feodar Novikov, Kuma Lisa on a stage in the form of a handsome man. None have ever outshone me in cunning or showmanship, nor have I ever allowed myself to back down from a stage. Yet now, in the face of a plot only we performers and a few others in all of France know about, I revert to a mere mortal. Will this country resemble the place I was born for even a month after we enter the hearts of our audience tonight. Nay! Things have come too far and whether we complete our show tonight or not, war is inevitable. I will not aid in this madness. The sooner I escape the better for me. I’m a man of many names, but no name, neither coward nor valiant, matters if I am buried beneath a pile of bodies bearing the title of pride and the badge of a soldier.

The door bell jingles above me as I enter Le Cheval Noir pub where Domi and Pierre await. We came here often, me and Domi, but recently she has been otherwise occupied with her lover Pierre. Even so, I had a feeling after my performance, or lack of one, they would be here. My usual stool is taken by Domi tonight. She probably took it on purpose. I couldn’t blame her. “Oh, look who finally decides to show his face.” She sounds calm, normal, but I can tell she is pissed. She never smokes unless she is upset. That pack in her hand is nearly empty. That should have been enough warning.

I turn, adjusting my collar, and flash a smile that once stopped a riot of critics. “I got distracted by all the beautiful women backstage.” Pierre is hiding a grin behind the rim of his cup. Domi is far less amused. I think she wants to kill me. That’s the trouble with her, she is the best audience and the worst friend. I find a seat but it’s between them, almost like...oh, never mind it is definitely a set up. No point in complaining. Here we go....

“You’re horrible, you know that Novikov?” A long drag from the cigarette between her fingers...” You told me that you were ready for another show and after almost a month of advertising the

'incredible Novikov', you can't even be bothered to perform!" Domi turns to look at me now; she's as terrifying as ever. I suddenly found the dark oak countertop very interesting. Besides, it's not like I can explain to her why I didn't perform tonight. I honestly don't understand how this woman can be so accomplished and smart yet so completely ignorant to the happenings right under her nose. Everyone involved in the production of the play seemed aware that it was simply a preamble to coming destruction. Everyone except Domi and Pierre. The renowned Theatrical Producer Dominique Monet, a name she had copied after Claude Monet himself, and Pierre, the head of the Auclair family. Both ironically oblivious even as the two most engrossed in this artistic world. It is like I was told as a young boy, 'those closest to the danger can only be so close because they do not even realize how very close they are'. Or else I had just underestimated her gaslighting abilities. That was highly possible and if so I should ask her to teach me. I could use such a skill right about now.

"If you have something you want to tell us, then we would gladly listen rather than be forced to assume what your problem is?" It is best you keep out of this Pierre. I'm in no mood for your pacifism.

"I always have something to say." I say it with a loose smirk. Domi and Pierre didn't argue that. Me and Domi were far too close to strangling each other to say anything for a minute anyways. She tosses me a wad of paper. My check. Oh-and a train ticket?

"That's your pay. I was planning on giving you double if you performed well but.." She crushes the cigarette into the metal tray on the countertop. Sure, whatever, that's what they all say after they cut your pay in half. But what is the ticket for? There is no way that she is already scheduled for another show when I only just returned from a trip to another of Domi's theatres before the one she held tonight. She couldn't possibly know about my plans since she doesn't know about anything else. So what...?

"No, it's not a show if that's what you're thinking." She chugs the rest of her drink and slams it onto the table with enough noise to make a few patrons turn their heads before resuming their noisy conversations. "How old are you again Novikov? Fifteen, Twenty?" I hate this woman. Seventeen dammit! This is only the tenth time.

"I'm seventeen, ma'am." She glares but Pierre makes a noise that tells her to let my insult go. I can't help but smile. Domi hates it when she gets referred to as anything remotely old and I haven't forgotten how much she despises the word ma'am. The same word she uses for the wrinkly peacocks that pay an arm and a leg to attend her shows.

"Seventeen is old enough to get onto the train without trouble. Since you owe me now for your screw up concerning my play tonight, I want you to do me a favor and visit my home in Auvers. I need someone to check on my family but I'm too busy at the moment." Wait, she is from Auvers! Like the Auvers-sur-Oise? I had no idea Domi was from such an artistically historic place. Still, Auvers is only a ways outside of Paris. Not nearly as far as I was hoping to get this week.

"Auvers-sur-Oise is it...?" This time it seems I've missed something because at almost the same time, Pierre and Domi burst out laughing. I give them a seemingly embarrassed and annoyed glare but it still takes them a while before they are composed again. "I'm glad you both found me so amusing." My voice reeks of teen angst. I play it well. Domi wipes at the corners of her eyes and shoves the pack of cigarettes back into her jacket pocket. Pierre also gathers his stuff.

"No Novikov. This isn't a field trip. I'm sending you to Auvers Gevaudan, and I want you to stay there for a while. Of course if you refuse I can always blacklist you from every stage I have

contacts with.” Threats. How cliché. All the way in Gevaudan though....interesting. That’s almost three hundred miles from Paris—a remote hamlet honestly. Much farther away than Auvers-sur-Oise. This could work.

“You’re not my mom you know! I don’t actually have to listen to you! I’m not trekking half across the country to comfort your grandmother or something. I’m a renowned actor, a jester of great talents!” Three seconds, and right before she can say something in response I fold the ticket in obvious resignation. “Fine. I’ll go. Only because I do owe you now.” Domi and Pierre share a look. They are pleased, exactly as I knew they would be. They think that threat must have gotten to me.

“Great. I can’t say I understand what’s gotten into you today but I’ll take it!” Domi pats me on the back and Pierre stands to get the door for her; his coat hanging off his arm. She turns to give me one last look before they leave. “Make sure to give Elise my regards?”

A gust of cool air from outside ruffles my hair as the door thuds shut behind them. Only a year ago from now I would have felt awful for what I just did. I don’t. Such an emotion is meaningless after all that’s been done to get here. It wasn’t as if it was my fault that Dominique and Pierre were so dim that they didn’t realize the urgency in which they should be leaving this city. I had realized. Better yet, Domi had given me a free ticket directly out of Paris and to a far district at that. I truly do owe her. She has made my escape much easier. Women really should be more careful around actors. I am what I say. The most renown actor and jester of all Paris.

“Bar tender!” I have until tomorrow to relax, then I reapply the mask and get the hell out of this city. “A toast to Gevaudan and escape!” The poor bartender only nods and returns to wiping his glass. I’m not sure how quickly war is coming, but if this is anything like what happened back then, then no one here has as much time as they think. Not even the ones on the inside of all this. Paris will be ashes by the end of the week.

The cobblestone streets once held a unique, seemingly everlasting warmth, not something physical for all the rain and fog and temperateness of the place, but something felt in one’s soul. Now there is a certain emptiness to everything. Like a house heated by a bright fire; golden glow spilling over braided rugs, the smell of wood smoke and leather filling the space. Then, someone opens the door to this house, rips down the curtains, and douses the fire with water. The warmth vanishes, leaving only a cold taint to everything. This may feel like a dramatic illustration, and I would agree. It is dramatic. Yet somehow, it is fitting for the purpose of amusing myself. Besides, when has dramatics ever failed me before?

“Next!” I blink off my wandering thoughts and find a controleur clinging to the side of the train car. He had one foot set firmly on the metal step and a hand out in front of me. There is no getting past this man. With a swish of my ash coat I take a step towards him and bow with just enough reverence to seem mocking, my silver earring jingling an anthem.

“Ahh yes, the sacred ritual. Will you also be collecting my soul as well as my ticket?” The man simply raised an eyebrow and opened his hand wider.

“How dull,” I can only sigh.

“Sir, hand over your ticket or step aside.” There is not an ounce of humor outside the theater. I prefer to think I deserved a little entertainment before my departure? No. There is not a shred of joy for me left here.

I lean in just close enough that he can smell the faint scent of sandalwood on my collar. His stiff posture revealed the slightest flinch. Good, the perfect amount of attention.

I press the ticket into his hand and trap his gaze in a strong and venomous look. "A smart man might pack his bags and leave the city on this very train. In my most humble opinion."

Then I step past him before he can make a scene out of my kindness. By the time he turns to try and follow me with his eyes, I've already vanished into the cramped corridor of boarding passengers. Poor man. He will be here when this city goes under.

My cabin was not as large as I had hoped my savings could afford, but such is fate. A fate where Domi cuts your pay. I settled for a leather bound room with faded seats and a little square-shaped window overlooking the blurred countryside. With three or more hours until I arrived at my destination I had only my own mind, loud as it always seems to be, and the muffled voices of other passengers passing my closed door.

It's not much of a surprise I found myself ruminating on the future. That most dreaded idea. An idea that manages to strike fear into millions without a single limb or voice of its own. Truly a wonder.

My future is one of greater wonder still, for I have limbs, four in fact. I can stay with this supposed family of Domi's, or I can not. I could leave this country and restart somewhere far enough away I won't be faced with this conundrum ever again. Perhaps I could start my own traveling show? I am capable. The only real question is what I want to do. That has always been the only deciding factor for me.

If I want to survive this, which is preferable, than I suppose Domi's home is a good place to start. An elderly grandmother and a young niece, from what she has divulged. A pretty young niece at that; Elise. A good place for now. That much has not changed. No point in worrying while stuck in this speeding tin can.

Easier said than done. Soon enough I became so sick of my own wandering thoughts that I stuck myself to considering the script that had been mine for that last show. I had been the gallant boy. I had been given a happy ending in that story. A happy ending ever after the story's final act.

Happily ever after is a fantasy only the comfortable have the privilege to indulge. They can sit in their tall buildings under lap blankets beside candles with pen to parchment and consider all the ways happily ever after could play out. In comparison, Jimmy Kendle back in Paris is working the tickets line at the train station, sweating in his ugly blue uniform. His only fantasy is the day his manager gives him a raise.

Likewise I find myself also without any hope of a happy ending. Surely however safe Domi's home it too will eventually be consumed. I am a single man, however renown, against the wave of Fate. And Fate, well, she and I have never gotten along very well.